



Sabine Heinlein, “Artists Grapple With America’s Prison System,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2016.

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## Artists Grapple With America’s Prison System

By Sabine Heinlein | March 11, 2016

For several weeks in February and March, the Whitney Museum’s fifth-floor gallery has been drenched in the slamming of gates, the rattling of keys and the bellowing of prisoners and guards. The artist Andrea Fraser recorded the sounds at Sing Sing, the infamous prison 34 miles up the Hudson River, then fed them into a gallery that’s roughly the same size as the prison’s A Block.

“Down the River,” her commanding work, alludes to the practice of separating slaves — and prisoners to this day — from their families and sentencing them to backbreaking labor on the South’s cotton plantations. It is a show that prods viewers to consider “the institutional and symbolic polarization that increasingly defines American society,” Ms. Fraser said.

Artists around the country are grappling with America’s incarceration system, as a subject and a social force. Like Ms. Fraser, Cameron Rowland’s show at Artists Space engaged a privileged art world with the economic mechanisms behind mass incarceration, focusing on how our society benefits from prisoners’ labor.

“Museum curators are increasingly paying attention to artists that visualize the criminal justice debate, and bringing subjects like necessary prison reform into their institutions,” said Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1 in Queens. Last December, the Rauschenberg Foundation called for fellowship proposals for “Creative Interventions to Mass Incarceration,” granting chosen artists up to \$100,000.

More than five million Americans are currently in prison, on parole or on probation. As prisons swelled rapidly between the early 1970s and today, the country has seen another unprecedented, parallel expansion: The museum industry has grown at record speed, and art prices at auctions have exploded. Ms. Fraser recognizes the paradox of staging a show on prison conditions in an 18,200-square-foot gallery, in a museum that cost \$420 million to build. “I am not sure that on some level it isn’t an absolutely monstrous thing to do,” she said.

Artists have examined the apparatus of criminal justice before, but for most it was just one topic among many. Danny Lyon took photographs in Texas prisons in 1971 but later shifted his focus to a destitute region in China and, more recently, to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Among the artists who have made mass incarceration their life’s pursuit is the African-American couple Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick from New Orleans, whose work was exhibited in the 2015 Venice Biennale. Since 1979, the couple have documented life in and around Angola prison in Louisiana, the state with the country’s highest incarceration rate.

“The prison system survives because of free labor; that lets you know that slavery still exists,” he said, adding that Louisiana prisons lease out inmates as cheap laborers to surrounding communities,



contributing to the state's high unemployment rate. "In some towns, the only job is being a guard," he said.

Making art is not always enough. Like Mr. Calhoun, who teaches photography to disadvantaged children, Ashley Hunt, a multimedia artist based in Los Angeles, has split his time creating art that examines power structures and working with disenfranchised communities. One of his recent art projects, "Degrees of Visibility," was inspired by the controversy over a new jail adjacent to Frank Lloyd Wright's Marin County Civic Center, just north of San Francisco. The jail, which was criticized for defiling Wright's eminent architecture, was eventually built underground. Mr. Hunt's new series consists of exterior photo shots of prisons juxtaposed with writings and music that cement each facility within its community's complex history. The prisoners remain invisible to the eye of the viewer. "I always shoot from a public location," he said, "the gaze of the commuter who doesn't know what he's looking at."

This was once a fringe issue for artists and institutions, but Ms. Fraser credits increased awareness to news coverage of prisons like Rikers Island and legislative moves toward prison reform. Many museums have expanded their educational departments and raised a new generation of politically minded curators.

To illustrate the role artists play in the fight, Mr. Hunt insisted that the New Museum give free tickets to people who otherwise couldn't afford to see his performance, which dealt with New Orleans's refusal to evacuate the Orleans Parish Prison during Hurricane Katrina. Mr. Hunt said putting pressure on an institution can have a "micro-political effect" that ripples through the art world.

The curator at the Newspace Center for Photography in Portland, Ore., Yaelle Amir, recently invited Pete Brook, known for his blog [prisonphotography.org](http://prisonphotography.org), to organize the coming group show "Prison Obscura." (The exhibition was commissioned by Haverford College in Pennsylvania.)

"There's more of an expectation not just to see beautiful work on the walls but also to learn something about society," she said. "A gallery allows that space for it." She added, "You can't ignore the fact that there's more funding for this kind of work and a lot more support and that more nonprofit and community groups are bonding together with artists."

While Ben Davis, the author of "9.5 Theses on Art and Class," praises artists for taking up the topic, he warned: "We should push the question beyond just consciousness-raising. There is this progressive-era style of political art where well-to-do people throw banquets for homeless people and then stand up on the balcony and congratulate themselves. There is an icky history of using the suffering of the people at the bottom as a spectacle."

Some artists are taking inspiration from their own experiences with the criminal justice system.

Deana Lawson's series of intimate, yet alienating photographs — part of MoMA PS1's recent "Greater New York" show — tracked her cousin's prison visits over a period of years through images taken by a prison photographer in the visiting room. While the couple's infant grows into a kindergartner, the child's father, always in his correctional-green pants with the same downtrodden expression, seems to be stuck in time.

Sable Elyse Smith's interest in prisons is tied to her own father, who is serving a life sentence. Her show at Soho20 Gallery's project space showed aerial photographs of prisons lifted from the website of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Displayed alongside were a scattering of visual and auditory fragments that drew the viewer into the prisoners' cruel institutional world: a poem; a hostile blue light; scratchy sounds; and the picture of a Harlem school seen through a chain-link fence.

"I'm interested in violence and trauma and memory," Ms. Smith said, referring to her own childhood but also to America's larger social landscape.



While most of the artists emphasize the positive aspects of bringing attention to mass incarceration, Christine Wang, a young Los Angeles painter who studied under Andrea Fraser at the University of California, Los Angeles, is skeptical. "My paintings can't vote," Ms. Wang said matter-of-factly, adding that her work mostly deals with her feelings of guilt over her privilege as an artist. This is why she decided to help organize art auctions for Critical Resistance, a nonprofit that fights the building of more prisons in Louisiana and California.

In her most recent work, Ms. Wang adorned cardboard boxes with gold-leaf lettering that read *#dineLA* and *#1stworldproblems*. The hashtags refer to the gentrification of downtown Los Angeles. Shops, restaurants and art galleries have moved in, leading law enforcement to ticket homeless people for carrying open containers of alcohol. If they can't pay the fines, they end up in jail.

"The art world," she said, "is complicit in the mechanisms of racism and incarceration."